

# C-17 crews are in it for the long haul

Based at McChord in Washington state, airmen fly missions around the globe

BY NANCY MONTGOMERY  
Stars and Stripes

If they got frequent flier miles, the C-17 crews from the 97th Airlift Squadron would have enough to buy their own airlines by now, or at least to fly first-class forever.

Every two weeks, squadron crews leave McChord Air Force Base in Washington state and fly to Frankfurt, Germany, via McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. From there, they board another flight to "wherever they send us," pick up their own C-17 and fly all manner of missions in one of the U.S. military's area of operations, according to Maj. Robert Kubek.

After two weeks flying missions, usually in and around Afghanistan, they head back to McChord.

That's 16,500 miles just getting to work and back home again. And you think you have a commute!

"Back in Washington, it's three or four days before I feel normal again," said Maj. Steve Logan, who like other reservists with the 97th Airlift Squadron, was called to active duty more than two years ago.

"As soon as you go out, you start counting the hours ... 'When will I be home?'" said Master Sgt. Rodney Dunlap.

The commute, rivaled only by aviators out of California, just comes with the territory of the C-17, based in the United States and "designed to fly the expanses of the globe," as 1st Lt. Jeff Woods put it.

The 97th, along with the 728th Airlift Squadron, both a part of 446th Airlift Wing, had flown 35,000 combat hours and 176,000 total hours from February 2002 to December 2004, according to the Air Force, and had delivered more than 179,000 tons of cargo and 72,000 people.

All that flying is one reason why the C-17 usually flies with three pilots. At any one time, one of them might be napping.

The punishing schedule, with the poten-



DALE WORLEY/Courtesy of NATO Allied Land Component Command H.Q. in Heidelberg, Germany

A crew from the 97th Airlift Squadron out of McChord Air Force Base near Seattle commutes twice a month to Frankfurt, Germany, and on from there to Afghanistan and other places in the U.S. military's areas of operation. From left are Tech. Sgt. Brian Petro, Master Sgt. Rodney Dunlap, Maj. Steve Logan, 1st Lt. Jeff Woods and Maj. Robert Kubek. At right is crew chief Sgt. John Stark of the 437th Maintenance Squadron out of Charleston, S.C.

tial for almost constant jet lag, comes with at least one mitigating factor. Sometimes after they return to Washington, if they're up to date on all their duties and requirements, the crews are totally, if not blissfully, off work for the next two weeks.

"It's not what you think," said Tech. Sgt. Brian Petro. "It's a lot of jet lag. You spend a while trying to recover from flying around the globe. By the time you get all back in the cycle, it's time to go out again. It wears you out."

Petro, 40, worked for Federal Express before the reserve unit was activated. Dunlap, who turned 45 on Sunday, was an electrician with the city of Seattle. Logan, 38, is a former, furloughed Delta Airlines pilot. And Kubek, 35, said he mostly "played golf" before coming to active duty.

Although each say they certainly see shortcomings in the military, they also say their missions are a valuable contribution.

"This can be a flying hospital," Petro says of the C-17 he was riding in late last month, which, on that flight was filled with water trucks, Bulgarian military officers, a variety of public affairs officers, taciturn "agents," and one U.S. four-star general.

"I've been on this plane, we've gone halfway around the world to pick up one person," Petro said. "That's something."

Dunlap said it's a break from 17 years of electrician's work with the added bonus of saving people's lives, and Logan said although he doesn't consider himself a perfect fit with the military, he finds what he does "worthwhile."

Woods, 29, said he actually prefers this duty to his previous work as a flight instructor. "I definitely like being in the military more," he said. "I have a sense of being part of something larger than myself. I like the people I fly with."

On this particular trip, the Washington

crew had hooked up in Frankfurt with Staff Sgt. John Stark, 30, who was to be their mission crew chief. Stark, with the 437th Maintenance Squadron, had had a shorter commute: He'd come from Charleston, S.C.

It's a duty for which he volunteers every other month. "I could easily stay back in Charleston," said Stark. "But I feel I'm needed here."

There are at least two reasons why. The first is, better him than someone else. "I'm single. I'm not even dating anyone," he said. "My expenses are low. I'm easily deployable."

So here he was, he said, among the "long-haul truck drivers." But does he really think of himself in those humble terms? Which bring us to the second reason Stark volunteers:

"I don't usually admit it," Stark confided, "but I'm very proud of what I do."

Nancy Montgomery at: montgomeryn@mail.strips.osd.mil

## A production that's really off-Broadway

Time for missions makes rehearsals difficult, but private is optimistic about play in Iraq

BY RICK EMERT  
Stars and Stripes

MOSUL, Iraq — Even in Mosul the show must go on.

But, it almost didn't when only three people showed up for Friday's auditions for the play "Scuba Lessons," directed by Pfc. Jessica Surprise, 94th Engineer Combat Battalion (Heavy).

"A lot of people talked to me about it and were interested in auditioning," Surprise said. "I think missions probably prevented them from coming."

By Saturday morning she had her cast of five lined up — most of them from her battalion — and rehearsals were to begin on Monday.

To some, it may seem a little odd for soldiers to be thinking about putting on a play while deployed to Mosul, where mortars

*"It was common for soldiers to perform and entertain their fellow troops during World War II, but you don't see it so much nowadays."*

Pfc. Jessica Surprise  
94th Engineer Combat Battalion (Heavy)

and makeshift bombs are regular occurrences.

"I guess it's unusual to stage a play in a combat zone now," Surprise said. "It was common for soldiers to perform and entertain their fellow troops during World War II, but you don't see it so much nowadays."

The one-act play is a romantic comedy that takes place in a coffee shop. The productions are scheduled to run from Nov. 7 to 9 at the Forward Operating Base

Marez Community Activity Center. Surprise, who works in the supply section of Company A, 94th Engineers, knows that bringing the production to the stage won't be easy.

"It's going to be a challenge," Surprise said. "The soldiers will not be able to make all of the rehearsals, because there are so many missions. Everyone is very busy."

But, with six rehearsals each week lasting two-and-a-half to

three hours, the soldiers should be able to catch enough of them to learn their lines and cues.

A couple of them, like Spc. Justin Teplitz, Headquarters Support Company, 94th Engineers, have some experience with high school productions.

"I took an acting class in college and was in high school plays," he said. "This will be a little change; a break from the daily duties."

As one of the three who showed up for the auditions, Teplitz was guaranteed a role in the play.

The work now will be constructing the sets. While the activity center has carpenters who can help build the sets, Surprise said she would try to get carpenters from her unit to pitch in, as well.

She downloaded scripts from the Internet and got permission through e-mail from the play's au-



Pfc. Jessica Surprise

thor, Joseph Zeccola, to stage the play free of charge.

"He was very gracious; he was pleased that his play would be performed in Iraq," she said.

Rick Emert at: emert@mail.strips.osd.mil